WHO WAS JESUS CHRIST?

BY "ICONOCLAST."

MANY persons will consider the question heading this pamphlet as one to which the Gospels have given a sufficient answer, and that no further inquiry is necessary. We, in reply, point out that while the general Christian body affirm that Jesus was God incarnate on earth, the Unitarian Christians, less in numerical strength, but numbering a large proportion of the more intelligent and humane, absolutely deny his divinity; and even in the earliest ages of the Christian Church heretics were found who scrupled not to deny that Jesus had ever existed in the flesh. Under these circumstances, it is well to prosecute the inquiry to the uttermost, that our faith may rest on sure foundations.

The history of Jesus Christ is contained in four books, or gospels. We know not with any degree of certainty, and have now no means of knowing, when these gospels were written, we know not where they were written, and we know not by whom they were written. Until after the year A.D. 200, no author, except Irenæus, professes to mention any gospels by Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John, and there is no sufficient evidence to identify the gospels we have with the writings to which Irenæus refers. The Church has, however, kindly provided us with an author for each gospel, and the early Fathers have proved there ought to be four gospels, because there are four seasons, four principal points to the compass, &c. Our duty is simply to believe. With regard to the gospel first in order, it is true that divines themselves disagree as to the language in which it was written. Some allege that the original was in Hebrew, others deny that our Greek version has any of the characters of a translation. This increases our difficulty, but if we wish for temporal welfare we must believe with the party which is most fashionable, and if we simply wish for truth, we had better disregard all parties and avoid their creeds. Our authorised English translation of the four gospels is made from the received Greek version; this version was made at Alcala in Spain, and the MSS. from which it was obtained, were afterwards sold by the pious Christians and manufactured into sky-rockets by one Toryo, a firework maker. So that the same Christians who threaten us with the pains of hell if we reject the gospels, actually condemned their own books to brimstone and fire. The only variation in the mode of burning is this—the holy MSS., when made into sky-rockets, were shot upwards and burnt in their ascent to the heavenly regions, and we are to burn in our descent into the lower regions of the bottomless pit.

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We do not know the hour, or the day, or the month, or the year, in which Jesus was born. The only point on which divines generally agree is, that he was not born on Christmas Day. The Oxford Chronology places the matter in no clearer light, and more than thirty learned authorities give us a period of over seven years difference in their reckoning. The place of his birth is also uncertain, as may be ascertained by careful reference to the text. For instance, the Jews in the very presence of Jesus reproached him that he ought to have been born at Bethlehem, and he never ventured to say, "I was born there." (John, chap. vii., vv. 41, 42, 52).

Jesus was the son of David the son of Abraham (Matthew, chap. i.), and his descent from Abraham is traced through Isaac, who was born of Sarai (whom the writer of the Epistle to Galatians, chap. iv., v. 24, says was a covenant and not a woman), and ultimately through Joseph, who was not only not his father, but is not shown to have had any relationship to Jesus at all, and through whom the genealogy should not be traced. There are two genealogies in the four gospels which have the merit of contradicting each other, and these in part may be collated with the Old Testament genealogy, which has the advantage of agreeing with neither. Much prayer and faith will be required in this introduction to the history of Jesus. The genealogy of Matthew possesses peculiar points of interest to a would-be believer. It is self-contradictory, counts thirteen names as fourteen without explanation, and omits the names of three kings without apology. Matthew says Abiud was the son of Zorobabel (chap. i., v. 13). Luke says Zorobabel's son was Rhesa. The Old Testament contradicts both, and gives Meshullam and Hananiah and Shelomith, their sister (1 Chron., chap. iii., v. 19), as the names of Zorobabel's children. Some Greek MSS. insert "Joram" into Luke, chap. iii., v. 33. I do not know whether we shall be damned for omitting or for inserting Joram; those who believe had better look to this. Jesus was born without a father after his mother had been visited by the angel Gabriel, who "came in unto her" with a message from God. His reputed father, Joseph, had two fathers, one named Jacob, the other named Heli. The divines feeling this to be a difficulty, have kindly invented a statement that Heli was the father of Mary. The birth of Jesus was miraculously announced to Mary and to Joseph by visits of an angel, but they so little regarded the miraculous annunciation that they marvelled soon after at things spoken by Simeon, which were much less wonderful in character. Jesus was the Son of God, or God manifest in the flesh, and his birth was first discovered by some wise men or astrologers. The God of the Bible, who is a spirit, had previously said that these men were an abomination in his sight, and he therefore, doubtless, preferred them to be his first visitors in the flesh to keep up his character for incomprehensibility. These men saw *his* star in the East, but it did not tell them much, for they were obliged to come and ask information from Herod the king. Herod inquired of the chief priests and scribes; and it is evident Jeremiah was right, if he said, "The prophets prophesy falsely and the priests bear rule by their means," for these chief priests, like the Brewin Grants and the Brindleys of the present day, misquoted to suit their purposes, and invented a false prophecy by omitting a few words from, and adding a few words to, a text until it suited their purpose. The star, after they knew where to go, and no longer required its aid, led the wise men and went before them, until it came and stood over where the young child was. This story will

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be better understood if the reader will walk out at night and notice some star, and then see how many houses it will be over. The writer of the third gospel does not appear to have been aware of the star story, and he therefore invents an angel who tells some shepherds; but as this last named adventure does not appear to have happened in the reign of Herod at all, perhaps Jesus was born twice. After the wise men had left Jesus, an angel warned Joseph to flee with him and Mary into Egypt, and Joseph did fly and remained there with the young child and his mother until the death of Herod; and this was done to fulfil a prophecy. On referring to Hosea (chap. xi., v. 1), we find the words have no reference whatever to Jesus, and that, therefore, either the tale of the flight is invented as a fulfilment of the prophecy, or the prophecy manufactured to support the tale of the flight. The Jesus of the third gospel never went into Egypt at all in his childhood; perhaps there were two Jesus Christs?

When Jesus began to be about thirty years of age he was baptised by John in the river Jordan. John, who knew him, according to the writer of the first gospel, forbade him directly he saw him; but, according to the writer of the fourth gospel, he knew him not, and had, therefore, no occasion to forbid him. God is an "invisible" "spirit," whom no man hath seen (John, chap, i., v. 18), or can see (Exodus, chap. xxxiii., v. 20); but John, who was a man, saw the spirit of God descending like a dove. God is everywhere, but at that time was in heaven, from whence he said, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." Although John heard this from God's own mouth, he did not always believe it, but sometime after sent two of his disciples to Jesus to inquire if he were really the Christ (Matthew, chap. xi., vv. 2 and 3).

Immediately after the Baptism, Jesus was led up of the spirit into the wilderness to be tempted of the devil. I do not know anything about either "the spirit" or "the devil" here mentioned, and the writer does not explain anything about them; he speaks of them familiarly, as old acquaintances. Jesus fasted forty days and forty nights, and in those days he did eat nothing. Of course it would be difficult to find a more severe fast—forty days and nights is a long period to abstain from food. Moses fasted twice that period. Such fasts take place in religious books, but they are seldom found in every-day life. Such fasts are nearly miraculous. Miraculous events are events which never happened in the past, do not take place in the present, and never will occur in the future. Jesus was God, and by his power as God fasted. This all must believe. The only difficulty is, to understand on the hypothesis of his divinity, what made him hungry. When Jesus was hungry the devil tempted him by offering him stones, and asking him to make them bread. We have heard of men having hard nuts to crack, but that stones should be offered to a hungry man for extempore bread-making hardly seems a probable temptation. Which temptation came next is a matter of doubt. The Holy Ghost, which the clergy assert inspired Matthew and Luke, does not appear to have inspired them both alike, and they relate the story of the temptation in different order. According to one, the devil next taketh Jesus to the pinnacle of the temple and tempts him to throw himself to the bottom, by quoting Scripture that angels should bear him in their arms. Jesus was, however, either a disbeliever in Scripture, or remembered that the devil, like other gentlemen in black, grossly misquoted to suit his purpose, and the temptation failed.

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The devil then took Jesus to an exceeding high mountain, from whence he showeth him all the kingdoms of the world, and the glory thereof, in a moment of time, which was very quick. It is urged that this did not include a view of the antipodes, but only referred to the kingdoms then known. If this be true, it must have been a long look from Judea to China, which was then a known kingdom. The eye of faith will, however, see things afar off, and sometimes will also see things which are not. The mountain must have been very high—much higher than the diameter of the earth; it must have been solid in proportion, therefore would have capsized the earth in its revolutions, if even temporarily placed upon it. The devil then offered Jesus, who was the same as God, and therefore omnipotent, all the kingdoms of the world, if he, Jesus the omnipotent God, would fall down and worship his own creature the devil. Some object that if God is the creator and omnipotent ruler of the world, then the devil would have no control over the kingdoms of the world, and that the offer could be no temptation as it was made to Jesus, who was both God omnipotent and all-wise, as well as man. These objectors may easily be answered by asserting that it requires a proper submission of the intellect, and an abhorrence of worldly reason, in order properly to understand these books. After this Jesus taught the multitudes. His teachings will form the subject of a separate tract. We are here only endeavouring to answer our preliminary question by a narration of his history.

After the temptation, Jesus is alleged to have worked many miracles, casting out devils, and otherwise creating marvels amongst the inhabitants of Judea. Bedevilment is now at a sad discount, and if a second Jesus of Nazareth were in this heretical age to boast that he possessed the power of casting out devils, he would stand a fair chance of expiating his offence by a three months' penance with hard labour in the highly polished interior of some Borough Jail. Now if men be sick and they have a little wisdom, the physician is resorted to, who administers medicine to cure the disease. If men have much wisdom they study physiology, while they have health, in order to prevent sickness altogether. In the time of the early Christians prayer and faith (James, chap. v., vv. 14 and 15) occupied the position of utility since usurped by rhubarb, jalap, *et similibus*. Men who had lost their sight in the time of Christ were attacked not by disease but by the devil; we have heard of men seeing double who have allowed spirits to get into their heads. In the days of Jesus one spirit would make a man blind, or deaf, or dumb; occasionally a number of devils would get into a man and drive him mad. We do not doubt this, nor do we ask our readers to doubt. We are grieved to be obliged to add that although we do not doubt the story of devils, neither do we believe them. Our state of mind is neither that of doubt, nor of faith, nor of absolute conviction of their correctness. On one occasion, Jesus met either one man (Mark, chap. v., ver. 2) or two men (Matthew, chap. viii., ver. 28) possessed with devils. I am not in a position to advance greater reasons for believing that it was one man who was possessed than for believing there were two in the clutches of the devils. The probabilities are equal—that is, the amount of probability is not greater upon the one side than upon the other—that is, there is no probability on either side. The devils knew Jesus and addressed him by name. Jesus was not so familiar with the imp or imps, and we find inquired the name of the particular devil he was addressing. The answer given in

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Latin would induce a belief that the devils usually spoke in that tongue. This may be an error, but, of course, it is well to give consideration to every particular when we know we are to be eternally damned if we happen to believe the wrong statement. Jesus wanted to cast out the devils, this they do not seem to have cared about, but they appear to have had a decided objection to being cast out of the country. Whether Palestine was the native country of the devils, and that therefore they were loth to quit it, I know not, but it is likely enough, as Christianity is alleged to have had its rise there. A compromise was agreed to, and at their own request the devils were transferred to a herd of swine. People who believe this may be said to "go the whole hog." The Jesus of the four gospels is also alleged to have fed large multitudes of people under circumstances of a most ultra-thaumaturgic character. To the first book of Euclid is prefixed an axiom that "the whole is greater than its part." John Wesley is alleged to have eschewed mathematics lest it should lead him to Infidelity. John Wesley was wise, for if any man be foolish enough to accept Euclid's axiom, he will be compelled to reject the miraculous feeding of 5,000 people with five loaves and two small fishes. It is difficult under any circumstances to perform a miracle. The original difficulty is rather increased than diminished by the assertion that after the multitude had been fed, twelve baskets full of fragments remained. Perhaps the loaves were very large or the baskets very small.

Jesus is related to have walked on the sea at a time when it was very stormy, and when, to use the words of the text, "the sea arose by reason of a great wind that blew." Walking on the water is a great feat if it be calm, but when the waves ran high it is still more wonderful. Perhaps it was because Jesus must have been often engulphed by the angry waves, that one sect prefers baptism by complete immersion. We admire this miracle; we know how difficult it is for a man to keep his head above water in the affairs of life.

The miracle of turning water into wine at Cana, in Galilee, is worthy of considerable attention, in the endeavour to answer the question, Who was Jesus Christ? Jesus and his disciples had been called to a marriage feast, and when there the company fell short of wine. The mother of Jesus, to whom the Catholics offer worship, and pay great adoration, informed Jesus of the deficiency. Jesus, who was very meek and gentle, answered her in the somewhat uncourteous and unmeaning phrase, "Woman, what have I to do with thee? mine hour is not yet come." His mother seemed to have expected a miracle by her conduct, yet if the fourth gospel speak the truth, that was the beginning of miracle working on the part of Jesus. Perhaps something had previously happened which is not recorded, and which would explain this apparent inconsistency. We must exert our faith to fill up any little gap which may be in the way of salvation. Jesus having obtained six waterpots full of water, turned them into wine. Teetotallers who reject spirits in bottles, but accept spiritual teachings, and who cannot believe God would specially provide means of drunkenness, urge that this wine was not of intoxicating quality. We will hope their hypothesis is a correct one, but there is nothing to justify it in our text. In fact, the curious connection between the phrase "well drunk" and the time at which the miracle was performed, would almost warrant the allegation that the guests were already in such a state as to render unnecessary the adminis-

tration of further intoxicants. The moral effects of this miracle are not easily conceivable by carnal minds. Shortly after this Jesus went to the temple, and in a meek and quiet manner, with a scourge of small cords, drove thereout the cattle dealers and money changers who had assembled there in the ordinary course of their business. It is hardly probable that the Jews would have permitted this without violent resistance to so rough a course of procedure. The writer of the fourth gospel placed this event very early in the public life of Jesus. The writer of the third gospel fixes the occurrence much later. Perhaps it happened twice, or perhaps they have both made a mistake in the time.

The Jesus of the four gospels is alleged to have been God the all-wise; being hungry, he went to a fig-tree, when the season of figs was not yet come. Of course there were no figs upon the tree, and Jesus then caused the tree to wither away. This is an interesting account to a true orthodox trinitarian. Such a one will believe—first, that Jesus was God, who made the tree, and prevented it from bearing figs—second, that God the all-wise, who is not subject to human passions, being hungry, went to the fig-tree, on which he knew there would be no figs, expecting to find some there—third, that God the all-just then punished the tree because it did not bear figs in opposition to God's eternal ordination. This account is a profound mystery to a truly religious man. He bows his head, flings his carnal reason away, and looks at the matter in a prayerful spirit, with an eye of faith. Faith as a grain of mustard seed, will remove a mountain. The only difficulty is to get the grain of faith; all is easy when that is done. The "eye of faith" is a great help, it sometimes enables men to see that which does not exist. Jesus had a disciple named Peter, who, having much faith, was a great rascal and denied his leader in his hour of need. Jesus was previously aware that Peter would be a rascal, and he gave him the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and told him that whatsoever be bound on earth, should be bound in heaven. Many an honest man has been immured in a dungeon, and has had the key turned on him by a rascally jailor. It is to be regretted that the like should be promised for all eternity. Peter was to have denied Jesus three times before the cock should crow (Matt. xxvi., v. 34). The cock was doubtless an infidel cock, and would not wait. He crowed before Peter's second denial (Mark xiv., v. 68).

Commentators urge that the words used do not refer to the crowing of any particular cock, but to a special hour of the morning called "cockcrow." The commentators have but one difficulty to get over, and that is, that if the gospel be true, their explanation is false.

Peter's denial becomes the more extraordinary when we remember that he had seen Moses, Jesus, and Elias talking together, and had heard a voice from a cloud say, "This is my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased." If Peter could thus deny Jesus after having heard God vouch his divinity, and if Peter not only escapes punishment but gets the office of gate-keeper to heaven, how much more should we escape punishment and obtain reward, who only deny because we cannot help it, and who have no corroborative evidence of sight or hearing to compel our faith?

The Jesus of the first gospel promised that, as Jonas was three days and three nights in the whale's belly, so he (Jesus) would be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. Yet he was buried on Friday evening, and was out of the grave before Saturday was over. Of course this is

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susceptible of explanation; you must have faith and believe that in some other language something else was said which ought to have been translated differently. Or, if you cannot believe thus, then you must have faith until you stretch the one day and part of another day, and one night and part of another night, into three days and three nights.

Our orthodox translators have made Jesus perform a curious equestrian feat on his entry into Jerusalem. The text says, they "brought the ass and the colt and put on them their clothes and set him thereon." Perhaps this does not mean that he rode on both at one time.

On the cross the Jesus of the four gospels, who was God, cried out, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" God cannot forsake himself. Jesus was God himself. Yet God forsook Jesus, and the latter cried out to know why he was forsaken. Of course he did know, and he was not forsaken. This is one of the mysteries of the holy Christian religion which, "unless a man rightly believe without doubt he shall perish everlastingly."

At the crucifixion of Jesus wonderful miracles took place. "The graves were opened, and many bodies of the saints which slept arose and came out of the grave after his resurrection and appeared unto many." We do not know which saints these were. Whether they numbered amongst them St. Abraham, who permitted his wife to incur the risk of dishonour, and who accepted riches to gild his shame; who turned his wife into the desert with one bottle of water and some bread. Saint Lot, of whom the less said the purer our pages; Saint Judah, who wanted to burn alive a woman he had gotten with child; Saint Jacob, the liar and cheat; Saint Joseph, the model prime minister, who bought the people's rights with their own corn; Saint Moses, the conjuror, who killed 3,000 Jews because his own brother Aaron had persuaded them to make a golden calf; Saint "Jael," the blessed above all women, because she drove most treacherously a nail into the skull of a sleeping guest; Saint Samson, who slew one thousand men with the jawbone of an ass; Saint Gideon, who frightened a large body of Midianites with trumpets, pitchers, and lanterns. Poor Midianites, they had all been exterminated long before Gideon's time; it must have been an extraordinary providence to bring them into life in order to frighten them; but God's ways are not as our ways. This is a digression—in plain language, we do not know who "the saints" were. They "appeared unto many," but there is not the slightest evidence that any one ever saw them. Their "bodies" came out of the graves, so we suppose that the bodies of the saints do not decompose like those of ordinary human beings. As the saints rose, so did Jesus. As they had their bodies, so had he. He must have much changed in the grave, for his disciples did not know him when he stood on the shore (John xxi., v. 4).

According to the first gospel Jesus appeared to two women after his resurrection, and afterwards met eleven of his disciples by appointment on a mountain in Galilee. We do not know when the appointment was made; the only verse on which divines rely as being capable of bearing this construction is Matt., c. xxvi., v. 32, and that verse is silent both as to place and time—in fact, gives no promise of any meeting whatever. According to the second gospel, he appeared first to one woman, and when she told the disciples they did not believe it. Yet we are bound to unhesitatingly accept that which the disciples of Jesus rejected. We have an advantage which perhaps the disciples lacked. We have several different stories of the same

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event, and we can select that which appears to us the most probable. The disciples might have been so unfortunate as to have only one account. By the second gospel we learn that instead of the eleven going to Galilee after Jesus, he came to them as they sat at meat. In the third gospel, we are told that he first appeared to two of his disciples at Emmous, and they did not know him until they had been a long time in his company—in fact, according to the text, it was evening before they recognised him, so we suppose the light of faith supplied the want of the light of day. Unfortunately directly they saw him they did not see him, for as soon as they knew him he vanished out of their sight. He immediately afterwards appeared to the eleven at Jerusalem, and not at Galilee, as stated in the first gospel. Jesus asked for some meat, and the disciples gave him a portion of a broiled fish and of a honeycomb, and he did eat. In these degenerate days it is hard to believe in a ghost eating fried fish, yet we must try to do it for our soul's sake, which otherwise may be burned for ever in the fire that is never quenched. There is certainly nothing more improbable in God the Son eating broiled fish after he was dead, than there is in believing God the Father ate dressed calf, tender and good, prepared for him by Abraham (*vide* Genesis, c. xviii.) A truly pious and devout mind will not look at the letter which killeth, but for the spirit which maketh alive. Jesus was afterwards taken up into heaven, a cloud received him, and he was missed. God of course is everywhere, and heaven is not more above than below, but it is necessary we should believe that Jesus has ascended into heaven to sit on the right hand of God, who is infinite and has no right hand.

Our question at the commencement was, "Who was Jesus Christ?" Was he a man?—surely not. Born without a father, in the lifetime of Herod, according to Matthew, yet not in his lifetime according to Luke. Residing in Egypt, according to Matthew, at a period in which, if Luke be true, he never could have visited Egypt at all. His whole career is, not simply a series of improbabilities, not simply a series of absurdities, but, in truth, a series of fables destitute of foundation in fact.

Who was Christ? born of a virgin. So was Chrishna, the Hindoo god incarnate. The story of Chrishna is identical in many respects with that of Jesus. The story of Chrishna was current long prior to the birth of Jesus. The story of Chrishna is believed by the inhabitants of Hindostan and disbelieved by the English, who say it is a myth, a fable. We add that both are equally true, and that both are equally false.

Who was Jesus Christ? A man or a myth? His history being a fable, is the hero a reality? Do you allege that it was impossible to forge books so large as the gospels? then the answer is that Christians were skilled in the art of forging epistles, gospels, acts, decrees of councils, etc. Will you urge that this only applies to the Romish Church? Then you will admit that your stream runs from a polluted fountain? Who was Jesus Christ? Who was Saint Patrick, who expelled the reptiles from Ireland? Who was Fin ma coul? Who was Odin? Perhaps there was a man who really lived and performed some special actions attracting popular attention, but beyond this Jesus Christ is a fiction.

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